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ABSTRACT

The primary forces fueling the movement toward placing 4-year-olds in the school system are the needs of working mothers, school systems facing client shortages, and the schools' promise of increased pupil achievement. But will the achievement of children, particularly black children, increase? Black parents have several reasons to question public schools' promise of achievement. Numerous conditions stand in the way of a successful transition from the current scope of public school education to programming for 4-year-olds. Of particular consequence are conflicts between the traditions of early childhood education and those of public education; between current public school curriculum and teaching methods and those appropriate for very young children; and between the public schools' practice of testing to classify children and early childhood's developmental goals. Other obstacles are teacher training for public school certification that is oriented toward older children and does not take account of preschoolers' different learning patterns and needs, and the likelihood that proportionally few teachers in the new programs are likely to be black. Concluding remarks offer recommendations concerning the process of translating the early childhood research base into high quality public school program practices. (RH)

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The Four-Year-Old Movement: Motivations, Outcomes and a Few Unanswered Questions

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This presentation escribes the findings from literature and observation to address the need for placement of four-year -olds in public schools in some kind of pre-kindergarten programs.and the need for these kinds of programs and the positive effects on children through being enrolled in such programs.

The place of four-year-old children in preschools is fast becoming a reality. Yet, for too long, the literature associated with this issue has made the mistake of confusing motivations with outcomes. It is imperative that research examine both the forces that are propelling this movement and the directions they are taking us in order for rational decisions to be made about the future educational options of our children.

My observations on these topics are addressed largely to the public school placement of four-year-olds. I think it is practical to make this emphasis, as it is in the public schools that we will find the majority of black children in the future. While my interest lies primarily with black children, my concerns are not far removed from those of concerned white parents as well. All parents should be asking the questions I will address in an effort to ensure responsible decision making for their children.

No one can doubt, upon reviewing the data, that there is indeed a four-year-old movement today in America. According to the Bureau of the Census, the percentage of three- and four-year-olds in preschool programs nearly doubled between 1970 to 1983, from 21 percent of all children to 38 percent of all children. In 1984, there were one million three-year-olds and 1.7 million four-year-olds enrolled in nursery schools. Public schools in over two-thirds of the states now offer some pre-kindergarten programs, and state funding for pre-kindergarten programs, independent of federal funding, is a growing phenomenon. In 1984-85, state-funded early childhood programs served about 172,000 preschool aged children, with total funding of $277 million. Early childhood education is big business, and, if you ever doubted that this movement was controversial, you need only consult the daily newspapers and news magazines to discover that we are standing in the middle of an emotionally charged issue. Let me share just a few of these headlines with you:

From The Washington Post:	PRESCHOOLS ACCUSED OF PUSHING TOTS TOO HARD
The Washington Post again:	TWO CLASSES OF CHILD CARE -- PROBLEM COULD TEAR NATION'S SOCIAL FABRIC, CRITICS CONTEND
From Education Week:	SCHOOLS GAINING IN COMPETITION TO SPONSOR EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS
From The New York Times:	EARLY SCHOOLING IS NOW THE RAGE
From USA Today:	PUBLIC-SCHOOL SITES FOR DAY CARE UNDER SCRUTINY
And from Education Week again:	CHILD CARE IN SCHOOLS MAY HARM BLACKS

That last citation was the result of a report released by the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) in January of 1986. This report, entitled "Child Care in the Public Schools: Incubator for Inequality?" outlined NBCDI's concerns regarding the ability of the public schools to adapt various aspects of their curriculum and administration to the needs of very young children.

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It is regrettably true that our report has further fanned the fires of controversy surrounding this issue, sparking additional articles in the national press. This cannot be avoided by any group seeking to question national policies. But it is my fervent hope that this report also has caused thoughtful people, academics and researchers among them, to re-examine the entire issue and to ask themselves: What are we doing? Why are we doing it? and Is it good for the children? Any thoughtful analysis of these questions should begin by examining motives. What is fueling the movement toward placing four-year-olds in the school system? The answers are numerous and complex.

Perhaps the most obvious reason for earlier preschool education relates to the need for reliable, affordable childcare by two-wage earner families or single parent households. The four-year-old movement owes a great deal to the women's movement. In 1980, there were only 1.6 million licensed day care slots -- private, public and commercial -- while 7 million preschool children had working mothers.

Yet, the need for child care is hardly a new phenomenon in the black community. Black women have historically worked outside the home. Whether as part of a two earner family or as sole providers in one parent households, the majority of black women have worked outside the home to raise their families. These women have always had to depend on outside care for their children. For the most part, black families have relied on relatives to care for their children. Almost half (44.9 percent) of black mothers with jobs outside the home still leave their preschool children with relatives.

That system is in the process of change. Young black women and their families are losing their traditional family support system for child care. Their mothers and grandmothers, the women who used to be babysitters, are now more likely to be in the paid workforce. So the question now arises in the black community, as in the white community: Who will mind the children?

It is logical for parents, and especially for black parents, to look to the public school as an answer to this question. Many of the qualities which have made public schools attractive sites for school age child care programs now make public schools attractive sites for preschool age children: many parents prefer to have all their children at the same location throughout the day; the cost is substantially less than private facilities; and the public schools have a reputation as a melting pot of social and ethnic differences.

Now, new forces make the public schools even more interested in attracting this new clientele. Declining enrollments among traditional age students and the threat that neighborhood schools will close have prompted many parents and principals to unite in their efforts to establish preschool programs. When teaching positions are earmarked for extinction, principals tend to reach out to this new population in need of tutoring. It does not take much imagination to conclude that preschool programs could indeed become the salvation of public schools threatened with closing by declining enrollments. It is not hard to imagine well-intentioned parents who seek to stabilize neighborhoods turning to preschool programs as a welcome panacea.

Another propelling force is the desire of parents to give their children an early start toward achievement. Today, parents see the enrollment of their child in a preschool program as the equivalent of the child's first step toward Harvard. Conversely, those parents who cannot afford to send their child or who do not choose to do so are regarded as impeding the developmental progress of their child.

Publicity about the benefits of exposure to quality early childhood education programs abounds. Most recently, the High/Scope Foundation Study, Changed Lives, has fueled this issue. The report's dramatic conclusions are that quality early childhood education for disadvantaged children makes for greater school success, greater socioeconomic success and greater social responsibility. Although some question whether generalized conclusions, such as reduced criminal behavior or fewer teen pregnancies, can be attributed to preschool experience, there is general consensus that participation in a quality early education program often leads to later educational achievement.

Black parents, like white parents, feel pressured into preschool programs by the threat that their children will lag behind those with preschool credentials. Black parents who desperately seek a route out of poverty for their children, as well as the more affluent, are especially susceptible to this promise. Yet, few have examined the difference between the kind of high quality early education program represented by the

High/Scope experiment and the nature of the programs to be provided their child in their local public schools.

These, then, are the primary forces fueling the movement toward preschool education: the needs of working mothers, the needs of school systems facing client shortages and the promise of achievement. Most people would agree that these are sound motivations. They are, however, based primarily upon expediency and good intentions rather than upon a solid research base. The question remains: does the solution -- placing four-year-olds in the school system -- meet our expectations? While we may be solving problems for working mothers and for undersubscribed school systems, are we heading our children toward achievement? For that must be the primary consideration: our children's achievement. How are we to judge whether the four-year-old movement is indeed a step toward achievement? How can we reassure ourselves that the public schools will develop the skills and techniques necessary to nurture black talent at its most fragile and formative stage? Or will public school-based child care programs adopt the methods and procedures of elementary education which have operated, in many cases, to segregate blacks and to label them as non-achievers?

There are a number of good reasons why black parents must question the public schools' promise of achievement. First, the public schools do not have an impressive track record in supporting the achievement of school-aged children. Today, 40 percent of minority youth are functionally illiterate. Black children are twice as likely as whites to be suspended from school or to suffer corporal punishment. Black children are three times as likely as whites to be placed in educable mentally retarded classes, where they make up 40 percent of all children. Finally, only 20 percent of black high school seniors go on to college. This is not an impressive foundation on which to build new programs for black pre-schoolers.

There are a number of other factors which stand in the way of a successful transition from the current scope of public school education to the inclusion of four-year-olds. First, the conflict between the traditions of early childhood education and those of public education are significant. Early childhood education has traditionally focused on the developmental needs of the child in the context of the social welfare of the family. By encouraging the involvement of parents and by reinforcing their central position in the child's life, traditional early childhood programs have always operated with a two client focus: the parent and the child. Yet, public schools traditionally focus on parents exclusively as agents to bring about a child's cooperation and socialization. Extensive family involvement is most often in direct opposition to public school procedures, despite its importance to the young child's development.

Second, current public school curriculum and teaching methods also conflict with those appropriate for very young children. Young children learn in context and in episodic fashion. Much depends on individual attention. As educator and NBCDI member Barbara Bowman has said, "In the first six years, children come to learning with a real inner drive to make sense of of the world and, in making sense out of the world, they learn to process information. What is important is that they achieve a balance between receiving information and constructing inner cognitive structures to handle that information, to make sense out of it. Young children need to receive their information in the context of how it is used." Yet, traditionally, public schools are structured primarily to impart information out of context: transmitting social content, values, and facts to children passively listening in large group settings. They are not set up to provide the young child with the opportunities to realize his or her developmental potential.

Another characteristic of public education procedure in conflict with early childhood development goals is its reliance on testing to classify children in groups. As bad as the effects of public schools' reliance on tests and tracking are for elementary school-age black children, they are worse for younger children. Preschoolers are too young to test reliably. Yet, group tests, rather than more individualized methods of evaluation, are universally used by public schools. Black families are already reeling under the negative impact of testing on their children. Who is to say that this movement toward early child care in the school will not simply serve to identify and isolate these so-called non-achievers at an even earlier age?

Still another public education characteristic in conflict with the best interests of young black children is the standard teacher education curriculum. Teacher training for public school certification is oriented toward older children and does not take account of preschoolers' different learning patterns and needs. Yet, economic pressure will surely exist to fill slots for early childhood programs with teachers holding tenure. These teachers may know little or nothing about the nature of their new charges. Moreover, despite the increasing

number of black children in the system and the young child's need to identify with his or her teacher, proportionally few teachers are likely to be black: less than 5 percent by 1990, researchers tell us. Clearly, we are on the horns of a dilemma. On the one hand, we need affordable, reliable child care. We want to give our children the best early start we can afford. On the other hand, we have some reason to suspect that the solution currently being offered may be far from ideal.

When NBCDI issued its report, it chose to issue at the same time a number of what we then called "safeguards." We urged the public schools to comply voluntarily with the basic criteria that ensure quality child care. These safeguards included: incorporating effective parent education programs; requiring teachers to have specific training in preschool education and/or ongoing inservice training provided weekly by qualified staff; and subjecting public school-based, early childhood programs to external review by community members and experts. The Institute viewed these safeguards as a beginning. They were our attempt to solve some immediate problems and to get schools and parents thinking and talking about what might constitute quality educational experience and environment for children. But the safeguards do not go far enough. Where we left off is where the new research must begin. In researching our report, we discovered that virtually no one was discussing the implications of the major change toward including four-year-olds in the traditional school curriculum. The Institute believes that we have yet to see the fundamental questions addressed by research. These questions are: Can public school-based, early childhood programs be adapted to meet black children's social and developmental needs? And, if so, what would it take to do this? In short, we need research-grounded answers to support our social priorities. We know the factors that contribute to high quality programs: low child to teacher ratios, developmentally appropriate curricula, parental involvement and well-prepared teachers, among others. The question then becomes: How can we translate what we know to those who are in charge of public school education?

We have learned from effective school research that there are factors that go beyond the basic teacher-child relationship to encompass characteristics of administrators and other critical areas of the learning environment. These factors become very important in considering the transition of an educational structure from its primary orientation toward serving older children to including preschoolers. While we have researched and demonstrated what can be done in quality early childhood experimental programs, how are we to transfer this knowledge in a way that can be endorsed and implemented by the public schools? It is not enough for researchers to concern ourselves with models and content. We must take the next step. We must take the critical issue of classroom implementation. In short, we must make it clear to those who must undertake the implementation how they are to transfer our findings into their settings. I believe this must be the chief challenge of researchers concerned with the four-year-old movement today. But there are other challenges as well.

First, research generally shows that young children need a free and open environment. This is a time when early learning should be more self-directed, more exploration than recitation. These needs, however, are in direct conflict with public school programs, which tend to be highly structured. Such programs teach the "form" of academic learning but often shut young children off from the content. How are we to accommodate the developmental needs of young children within the existing structure of the public school environment? This is a question for researchers.

Second, we know from numerous studies that children become interested in symbols and symbolic learning when it involves someone they love. Close, informal contact is conducive to their learning. How are we to provide this within the structure of today's urban public school? This, too, is a question for researchers.

Third, we are concerned by the growing body of evidence that points to a decline in performance after the third grade, even among those children who have had a quality preschool experience. What is happening to these children? Here again is a question for researchers: What can we do to help our children continue to excel?

And finally, a question which cuts to the heart of the educational process. Realizing that education does not happen solely in the schools, why can't we stimulate the parents of disadvantaged, low-income, minority children to become involved in the education of their children? These children must overcome the barriers if they are to succeed. They cannot receive quality care in the schools only to be undermined by a lack of interest or encouragement at home. What can we do to help parents help their children? Why is it that other

groups have been able to overcome poverty and to groom their children for achievement while black have not? Here indeed is a question suitable for research.

These are the challenges which face researchers interested in the four-year-old movement today. The movement, we all agree, is here to stay. Now we must direct our efforts toward getting the kind of movement we want. Model programs exist. In many areas, the research findings are clear. The hard work is how we translate what we know into those thousands of public schools around the country where our children are going to be taught. It is not enough for researchers to invent the ideals, we must stay involved through the practical applications of our research into classroom settings. If we do not, we will have only ourselves to blame when our children do not excel and we are told that they are getting a "quality" education. The public schools, far from being our enemies, must become our allies in an all-out battle for black achievement. That battle will only be won as parents, scholars and community leaders join forces to make our schools responsive to the documented developmental needs of all our children.

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